

ROMANS, Part 22 11-13-22

Life To The Dead

In the church Beth and I were a part of in Florida, something interesting and controversial happened soon after we left. A young couple in the church who had found themselves unable to have children, contracted with a married young mother, also in the church, for her to carry their child. You follow that? Mrs. Doe would carry and deliver the baby for the Smiths. And the genetic makeup of the baby would be entirely from Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Beth and I were close to both couples involved so this was highly interesting, and personal, but it was also divisive in the church family because some believed this arrangement was morally wrong. Frankly, I was thankful not to have to pastor the church through the tension – which did lead to some upset departures as the church was largely supportive of the young couples. Wow! The innovations in medicine lead to some difficult ethical dilemmas that previous generations did not face. In Scripture we encounter several women who were unable to bear children and the only place they had to turn was to God. The first of those stories involves Abraham and Sarah whose childlessness was complicated by the fact that Abraham's name meant – *the father of many*. Ha! Lots of folks got a chuckle out of that. Sarah was likely not one of them. But the story of how Sarah, decades past child-bearing years, gives birth to a son is just about the most well-known story in history. And in Romans, in the early stages of explaining the soul-saving gospel, the apostle Paul references this story to remind us of the power and promise-keeping faithfulness of God. Let's dig in for this final message from Romans 4 about how we may be saved. Romans 4:**16-25** *For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷(as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. ¹⁸In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." ¹⁹Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; ²⁰yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. ²²Therefore it*

was also credited to him as righteousness. ²³Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, ²⁴but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

We begin today with a look at the crazy promise. The crazy, incomprehensible promise God made to Abraham and Sarah when they were old and childless that they would be the parents of many nations and descendants as numerous as the stars. You will recall that Abraham and Sarah thought it was crazy. They laughed about it. They tried to figure out ways to help God out. They could imagine the math it would take to make this happen, but you had to start somewhere. A trillion times zero equals? Zero of course and that is how many children they had – way past the years to make babies. But here goes God making an outlandish promise. This would be like the Lord coming to me and saying, *Dan, this time next year you will be playing in the NBA.* I was never close to good enough for that. Far less so now. But this is a similar promise. And suppose I go to our elders and announce what God has told me. Would they assemble a pastor search team? Yes, they would because they would know, *Hendley has clearly lost his mind.* How can we, how can anyone intelligent adult, believe such a bizarre thing? But when it is the promise of God?

As most everyone knows, the most familiar Biblical story is wonderfully similar. God sends an angel to a young woman. Not an old, barren woman but a young woman who is not married and has not been with a man, is not to join with a man, and yet is promised a son. This is a step further into the incredible. Progressive-thinking scholars of the Bible have scoffed at the virgin birth claims of Scripture. Mary was the first. *How can this be since I am a virgin?* The angel explains the miracle-plan of God and says *nothing is impossible with God.* Paul reminds us of this in Romans 4. He uses different wording but what does verse 17 say? It speaks of God being believed because 17 *He gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.* All our advanced medicine, seeking for centuries to restore life to the dead, seeking to create life from nothing has gotten how close to that goal? Never even an inch of progress. But this was never a problem for God. We believe in creation – that creation which is ex-nihilo – out of nothing God spoke the world into existence. When you believe that, it should be no strain to believe God can give a child to a 90-year-old or to a virgin. So, the apostle points us to Abraham and Sarah as metaphors of what God does in

salvation. When He seeks to make us into new creatures in Christ, are we providing Him with all the right raw ingredients? Why no! It is more like me bringing you some rocks and hair and asking you to make me an omelet or a puppy. The power needed is a creative power that no human possesses. Paul wants us to get this, to grasp what God must sovereignly do. He must give spiritual life to the spiritually dead. He must call life, faith, love out of a soul that is hostile, selfish and dead toward God. This is sovereign grace. How sweet! How beautiful! How evocative of praise – when we understand it. In Ephesians 2 Paul gives us some very clear teaching along these lines. There we read this – Ephesians 2:**1-5** *You were dead in your trespasses and sins, ²in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).* And you may know verse **8** *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.* Paul says the faith is the gift of God. It doesn't come naturally – no way. I mean, seriously, think of the things we profess as Christians. Some pretty outlandish things. Virgin birth. Resurrection. A God-man. Atoning death. Really?! There are reasons to believe all of these, but I only do so because God has worked that faith in my soul and let me hear his voice. He changed my heart and has witnessed to me that Jesus is his son and I am to trust in Him no matter how outlandish his promise may seem.

So, that is the crazy promise. Now, to the miraculous faith. Babies from geriatrics - that's a miracle. The capacity to believe such a promise? Another miracle. Don't for a moment think Abraham was naïve about the biology. No! **19** *Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb.* He didn't ignore the science. He was not a science denier as some are called. He reckoned with all that was known about conception and aging. You and I are pretty good at doing that. But what else did Abraham do that we aren't so great at? **20** *with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.* Eventually, it seems Abraham settled in to a life of trusting and waiting. He even had a party at which he announced his name change. Imagine how that would have gone. He stands before his friends and says,

I am changing my name. No longer will I be "father of many." Thus far the announcement would make sense. No childless man wants to be reminded of his depravation by his own name. Abraham did have a son by now, through his concubine. The boy's name was Ishmael. Abraham's friends probably thought he would become "Abrechad" *father of one*. But no, he announces that his new name would be *father of a nation*, suggesting a vast multitude. So, he puts that out there and then he waits – for several years on the promise to come to pass. Plenty of chances to waver in unbelief, plenty of skeptical voices from within and without to fend off, but Abraham hung in there and continued to stand on the promises.

Note – brothers and sisters- he did have a promise. I encounter a lot of times believers who speak of trusting God for things God never promised. *Oh, we are trusting the Lord for a new car. We are believing God for a better job.* Did God promise you those? He promises good things to those who ask – so you can ask and wait expectantly for how He will answer - but His promises are seldom that specific. But when you do have a promise – that you can tie your boat to. And the promises of God are given to strengthen our faith. Understand that faith, in its nascent form is sufficient for justification. But faith can grow strong or stay weak. Faith can wax and wane. Thank God Abraham's faith grew strong. We are not told what he did to keep it up, but Romans 10 tells us faith comes by the word of God. We presume he kept reminding himself of what he had heard. As he waited for the promised child, he would observe himself growing older, weaker. He would observe Sarah in the same process. The things he saw and felt would make him wonder – Does that happen with you? Sure does for me – but this is where we must keep the word of God central in our thoughts and in our hearts. You think of Peter out there on the lake with Jesus. The Lord was walking on water and invited Peter to join Him in so doing. What happened next? Peter waxed strong in faith and launched out – took a few steps, then looked down, then thought of high-school physics class and forgot the word of Jesus – so he sank. The problem wasn't his understanding of physics – it was his lack of confidence in the word of Jesus. That is always the issue.

Now, when an intelligent adult hears a promise of something supernatural and rests his entire soul on that promise – one of the outcomes is that God is glorified. That is what we read in 14-15. Abraham believed God had this amazing power to bring life out of death and that faith magnified God, glorified God. It shouted forth, *My God is awesome, omnipotent, and great in love.* It says my Lord is truth and He is enough. Now, Abraham wasn't 100% at this – There was the

incident with Hagar and his trying to take matters into his own hands by utilizing his maid to give him a descendant. That ended very, very badly. That kind of behavior – the kind that says *I have to find a way by myself* - does the opposite of glorifying God. But when we face squarely all the skeptical claims of the world, all the propaganda that seeks to suck us in to the ways of this world and we stand firm, not just resisting, but resisting joyfully and victoriously, then our God is glorified and we are happy and fulfilled because what is our chief end? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is critical too for our witness to the world.

Our passage also says Abraham believed in *hope against hope*. That is an odd phrase that indicates he had very little basis for his confidence – other than the word of God. Hope is faith directed toward the future. Hope against hope is a Hebrew idiom suggesting that there are few encouraging signs. You see, I can trust God – but I really prefer He show me how He is going to keep His promise. I believe He will provide my daily bread, but it's nice to have a job and a bank account. I can see how He may provide. But sometimes He doesn't show us the way and He just says, *trust Me without that*. Hope against hope. To use a sports analogy – Here in Pittsburgh we hope the Penguins will win the Stanley Cup. That's a hope. If we hope the Pirates will win the World series, that is hope against hope. We will leave the Steelers out of this for now. But I think you get the point.

Wow – we still have two points to go – But fear not – these will be briefer. We have seen the crazy promise and the miraculous faith. Now let's remember justification by faith. Yes, we have been over this more than once, but everything Paul is setting forth in this section of Romans comes back around to that. So, referring to the faith of Abraham, it says Verse 22-24 *it was also credited to him as righteousness.* ²³*Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him,* ²⁴*but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.* Romans tells us that the ground of our justification is the righteousness of Christ. That is the power. Faith has no power of its own, but it connects the sinner with that power, with that work. And when it does, the righteousness of Jesus is credited, transferred, imputed to the believer. God provides the power. God provides the faith to connect to the power. God does the spiritual accounting on our behalf. From him, through him, unto him are all things. Amen? Say that with me – Romans 11:**36** *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

But there is still one more thing to thrill us from Romans 4 – Death and resurrection. Paul just mentioned God raising Jesus from the dead and then he

says **25** *He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.* Jesus is the one who was delivered over – Handed over. The verb is passive. The New Testament says Jesus laid down His life, but it also says He was delivered over to death. Now, who did that? There can be more than one good answer. Judas Iscariot did this – sold Him to the Jewish powers for money in the night. Pilate did this – delivered Him over to be crucified out of his cowardly self-interested commitment not to upset the emperor. But the passage says He was delivered over for our transgressions. The only party who could do that is God himself, the Father. And so, He did. Romans 8:**32** *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* For us who believe Jesus was delivered over to death as our substitute, as our atoning sacrifice. As He did for Abraham and Isaac, He provides the sacrifice that propitiates His wrath, that wins our deliverance, that even secures our righteousness. The passage says it was our transgression that led to Christ's death. He didn't die because we were trying so hard to obey. Quite the opposite. Our sin led to His death. That death secures our justification and then what? Because He accomplishes the grand redemptive mission, Jesus then is raised from the dead, crowned the victor over sin and death and hell. His resurrection is the seal of God on His sacrifice. He has ransomed us and so has been exalted to the right hand of God the Father almighty.

Once again, I feel how precious this gospel is. And the more we plumb its depths the more precious it is. But let's finish with a familiar story that illustrates our place in this drama. It is the drama of Barabbas. Barabbas was the robber and murderer who was awaiting execution at the time of our Lord's arrest. He was of no interest to Pilate, but Jesus was. Pilate did not want to kill Jesus so he hit on the idea of offering the people in Jerusalem a choice. One prisoner could go free as a Passover favor from Rome – who would it be, the rabbi or the murderer? To the astonishment of the governor the mob shouted, *Barabbas!* Donald Grey Barnhouse urges us to imagine Barabbas, sitting in his prison, looking at his hands which he soon expected to be pierced with nails. Suddenly he hears a commotion outside the jail. He hears his name being shouted. Then some muffled sounds followed by the shouts of *Crucify Him! Crucify Him!* Then a jailer comes to his cell. Barabbas thinks the time of execution has come. But the jailer tells him he is free. Jesus is to die instead. Likely both confused and elated, Barabbas joins the processional to the cross. He hears the hammer blows that he knew were meant for him. He hears Jesus say. *Father, forgive them.* He hears the centurion say,

surely this man is the Son of God. Barabbas must have been saying, *this good man took my place. I am the one who should have died. He is dying for me.* For Barabbas this was more literal and physical, but for us as well, when we ponder the death of Jesus, this is what we know. He was delivered over for my transgression and, praise God, He is raised because that death won my justification. Man of Sorrows - what a name, for the son of God to claim. Ruined sinners to reclaim, Hallelujah what a Savior!